DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 017 PS 029 863

AUTHOR Shelley-Sireci, Lynn M.; Ciano-Boyce, Claudia; Deramo, Marianne
TITLE Future Teachers' Attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian Parenting.
PUB DATE 2001-10-25
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (32nd, Kerhonkson, NY, October 24-26, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adoption; Age Differences; College Students; Higher Education; *Homophobia; *Homosexuality; *Parents; *Preservice Teachers; Social Bias; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Homosexual Parents

ABSTRACT

Noting current estimates that between 4 and 14 million children have lesbian or gay parents and recent research suggesting that most college students are homophobic, this study examined college students' homophobia and attitudes toward adoption. Participating in the study were 96 heterosexual undergraduate education majors at a state college who completed a questionnaire examining homophobia as well as attitudes toward adoption and tendencies toward socially desirable responding. Participants also read a case study vignette describing either a heterosexual or a homosexual couple interested in adopting and responded to questions about the couple. Findings indicated that the average score of education majors was in the moderate to mild range on the Index of Homophobia, with 77 percent of students classified as non-homophobic and 23 percent classified as low-grade homophobic. Older students were less homophobic than younger. Homophobia did not correlate with number of gay friends or family or to religiosity. Education majors did not differ from 191 non-education majors from the same institution on homophobia, attitudes toward adoption, social desirability, or attitudes toward gay/lesbian parenting. They generally supported adoption and had fairly positive attitudes toward gay/lesbian parenting. On the questions regarding the vignette, subjects rated heterosexual parents as creating the least dangerous home environment. Greater concern was shown when parents in the vignette were gay than when they were heterosexual. Subjects were most likely to recommend placement in the home of a heterosexual couple and least likely with a gay/lesbian couple, even when controlling for homophobic attitudes. The future teachers were unlikely to attribute childhood problems to their parents' sexual orientation. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/KB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 458 017

# Future Teachers' Attitudes Toward Gay and Lesbian Parenting

Lynn M. Shelley-Sireci

Claudia Ciano-Boyce

Marianne Deramo

Westfield State College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lynn M. Shelley-Sireci

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Paper presented October 25, 2001

Northeastern Educational Research Association

Kerhonkson, New York

PS 029863



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

The assumption and expectation in society is that all parents are heterosexual. Yet, it is estimated that between 4 and 14 million children have lesbian or gay parents. Research suggests teachers make assumptions about children based on their information about the family background of the students, and that most college students, including education majors, are homophobic. Thus, the research questions for the present study were: Are education majors homophobic? Do education majors approve of gay and lesbian parenting? Do education majors attribute the problems of troubled children to the sexual orientation of their parents? To address these questions, 96 heterosexual college students from a state college completed a questionnaire which contained indexes to assess: homophobia, attitudes toward adoption, and social desirability. They also read a case vignette describing a couple interested in adopting and responded to questions about the couple. Overall education majors scored in "low-grade non-homophobic" range on the *Index of Homophobia*, and future teachers were unlikely to attribute childhood problems to the sexual orientation of parents. However, education majors were most likely to recommend placement of a child into the home of a heterosexual couple, and least likely to place the child with a lesbian or gay couple. This finding held true even when homophobia was controlled for. Thus, our old definition of homophobia is not capturing the more subtle forms of sexual bias.

## Future Teachers' Attitudes Toward Gay and Lesbian Parenting

During the last half-century the profile of "traditional" family has changed dramatically, and today there is tremendous diversity in family constellations. While society has become less discriminatory and more accepting of some "non-traditional" family types, families headed by lesbian and gay parents continue to face social, legal, religious, and economic barriers. The assumption and expectation in our society is that all people are inherently heterosexual – this is especially true for people who have children (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Yet, it is estimated that 4 to 14 million children have gay or lesbian parents (Patterson, 1992). There is a growing body of research that shows parents' sexual orientation has little to no impact on child development, and in the studies that find small effects, they are usually positive (Patterson, 1992). In addition to parents, another group of adults who have considerable influence over children are teachers. Teachers make everyday decisions about individual feedback, curricula, and social events that can either assume all children come from a home with heterosexual parents, or can be more inclusive and supportive of families that are not headed by two opposite sexed biological parents.

An abundance of research suggests teachers make assumptions about children based on their knowledge of labels attributed to the children, and information about the family background of the students. Thus, teachers may relate differently to or have different views of students who they believe to be lesbian or gay or whose parents they know or believe to be lesbian or gay (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). Currently, the extent to which teachers are accepting of gay and lesbian parenting is unknown, as is the extent of their knowledge about homosexuality or their personal acquaintance with gay and lesbian individuals (Bliss & Harris, 1999).

Sears (1991a) found that most teachers and school counselors said they were willing to take a non-judgmental position about homosexuality and a wanted to gain an understanding of issues relating to sexual orientation; yet, in actual practice they were unlikely to initiate open discussions or create a safe environment for gay and lesbian students and parents (Sears, 1991a). Furthermore, teachers often send covert messages

about sexuality, by neglecting to discuss issues tangentially related to homosexuality (Sears, 1991b). Similarly, in anonymous surveys public school teachers from New Mexico reported to have limited education and knowledge about homosexuality (Bliss & Harris, 1999). Overall, the teachers indicated that compared to children with heterosexual parents, children of homosexual parents exhibited mostly similar personality traits and problems. But, they also rated students with lesbian or gay parents as more likely to have problems in social interactions; as well as indicated that these students might be more mature, tolerant, and self-reliant. Clearly, this foundation of research indicates that teachers, at minimum, think differently about children of lesbian or gay parents.

While there is a paucity of research on teachers' attitudes toward gay and lesbian parents, there is a little more research on the attitudes of college students, including college students preparing to become teachers. For example, previous studies report that when using the *Index of Homophobia* (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) most college students, including education majors, are rated as homophobic, and about 20% are "high-grade homophobic (Chng & Moore, 1991; Proulx, 1997; Sears, 1991a). Generally, males tend to be more homophobic than females (Donnelly, et al., 1997) and students become less homophobic with more years in school (Young, et al., 1991). Cotten-Huston and Waite (2000) found that among college students anti-homosexual attitudes were predicted by strong religious convictions, and more conservative and less egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles. In addition, personal acquaintance with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person was predictive of lower homophobia scores (Cotten-Huston & Waite, 2000; Wills & Crawford, 2000).

College students also hold negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting. For example, Crawford and Solliday (1996) asked students to read one of several vignettes describing a couple interested in adopting a child. The vignettes were identical, with the exception of the sexual orientation of the parents. Compared to heterosexual couples, students rated homosexual couples as less emotionally stable, more likely to create a dangerous environment for children, and the students were ultimately less likely to award custody of the child to a homosexual couple.

In an attempt to eliminate the paucity of research on this topic, the present study examined the attitudes and beliefs of education majors about homosexuality, gay and lesbian parenting, adoption, and adoption by gay and lesbian parents. The specific research questions were: Are education majors homophobic? What are the attitudes and beliefs that education majors hold about gay and lesbian parents? Do they approve of gay and lesbian couples adopting? Do they attribute the problems of troubled children to the sexual orientation of their parents? And, are attitudes toward adoption, attitudes toward gay and lesbian adoption, and homophobia interrelated?

## Method

### Participants

Ninety-six college education majors (*M* age 20.3, *sd*=3.7;) from a small New England state college participated in the study. Most were female (87%) and of Euro-American descent (93%). Thirty-one percent were in their first year of college, 14% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 28% seniors. Most were Catholic (67%) or Protestant (16%). Most of the students reported that they were heterosexual (98%). Seventy-five percent had at least one relative or friend who was gay or lesbian, and three of the participants had parents who were adopted.

### Procedure

Students were recruited through education and psychology classes, and received extra credit for their participation. Participants completed an informed consent form, and then received a questionnaire containing the *Attitudes toward Adoption Scale* (*ATA*; Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 2001), a case vignette and the *Couples Rating Scale* (*CRS*; Crawford and Solliday, 1996), the *Index of Homophobia* (*IHP;* Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), *the Gay and Lesbian Adoption Scale* (*GLAS;* Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 2001), a short form of the *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale* (Ballard, 1992; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), and questions about background and demographic information. Participation took approximately 30 minutes.

### Instruments

The *ATA* scale (Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 2001) contains 21 items about

attitudes toward adoption. All response options used 6-point Likert-type responses where 1 indicated strongly agree, and 6 strongly disagree. Some items represented positive attitudes, and some negative attitudes, so were reverse scored when obtaining total scores. The *ATA* is designed to uncover attitudes and beliefs about specific aspects of adoption. This can be accomplished by examination of responses to individual items, or examination of a global score of attitudes toward adoption ($\alpha$=.89). A high score emphasizes the social and nurturing aspects of parenting (support for adoption), and low scores reflect individuals who emphasize the importance of a biological link between parent and child (negative attitudes toward adoption). Possible total scores can range from 18 to 108. Similarly, the *GLAS* is designed to measure attitudes toward gay and lesbian couples adopting children, and contains 12 items. High scores on the *GLAS* indicate positive attitudes, and low scores reflect negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian parents' adopting. Possible scores can range from 12 to 72. Four items were positively worded, thus reverse scored when computing a total score ($\alpha$=.93).

Participants also completed a measure of homophobia. The*IHP* (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) contains 25 statements about different degrees of interaction with homosexuals and allows respondents to indicate their agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert type scale where 1 indicates strongly agree, and 5 strongly disagree. Negatively worded items are reverse scored to obtain a total score. Total scores can range from 0 (little fear of homosexual women or men) to 100 (a great deal of fear of homosexual men or women). Similar to previous research (Cotten-Huston & Waite, 2000; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), this scale was found to have high reliability ($\alpha$=.89).

In addition, participants read one case vignette and then completed the *Couples Rating Scale (CRS*), an 12-item scale ($\alpha$=.85) created by Crawford and Solliday (1996). The case vignette of approximately 500 words describes a college educated mature professional couple interested in adopting a 5-year-old orphaned child. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of six vignettes, each the same, with the exception of the sex of the characters; (1) John and Kim wishing to adopt a male child, (2) John and Kim

wishing to adopt a female child, (3) John and Ken wishing to adopt a male child, (4) John and Ken wishing to adopt a female child, (5) Jane and Kim wishing to adopt a male child, and (6) Jane and Kim wishing to adopt a female child. The questions that followed asked about the suitability of the parents. Additional items, created by the authors, asked about general support for adoption, as well as specific concerns about emotional, sexual or physical abuse in this specific case, and were not used in computing the total score.

Following the *CRS*, participants read a supplemental scenario in which five years had passed since the adoption and the child now exhibited problem behaviors in school. Participants were asked to agree or disagree on a 5 point scale with possible explanations for these "problem" behaviors. Reasons such as adoption, race, and bad teaching were included. Participants were asked if they would recommend referring the child to a psychologist, or meeting with both parents.

A short form of the *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale* (Ballard, 1992; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) was used to identify respondents who might be less prone to indicate their true thoughts and feelings, and more inclined to give "politically correct" responses about non-traditional families and lifestyles. Respondents were asked to indicate true/false for 13 statements of personal traits and attitudes. Socially desirable responses are coded 1, and alternative responses 0, therefore total scores can range from 0 to 13 where higher scores indicate a strong tendency to respond in a socially desirable fashion.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Overall education majors scored in the moderate to mild range on the *Index of Homophobia* (*IHP* $M$=40.6, $sd$=11.9). Eleven percent of students were classified as high grade non-homophobics, 66% were low grade non-homophobics, and 23% were low-grade homophobics. A significant correlation was found between age and homophobia ($r$=-.66, $p$<.001). Older students were less homophobic than younger. In contrast to previous research, there was no relationship between homophobia and the number of gay friends and family members students reported, nor the degree of religiosity of students.

There was a trend toward a significant difference between female's and male's responses on the *IHP* ($t_{(76)}$=-1.9, $p$=.06).

About half of the education students (51%) reported they discussed issues surrounding sexual orientation in college classes, and 14% had attended at least one event sponsored by the college's gay-straight alliance. Interestingly, there was a trend toward these students scoring lower on a measure of homophobia as compared to students who did not attend such events ($t_{(75)}$=-1.9, $p$=.06).

Students were generally supportive of adoption ($M$=80.7, $sd$=11), and had fairly positive attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting as indicated on the *GLAS* ($M$=56.2, $sd$=11.5). Most education majors scored in the low to moderate range of social desirability. No students earned the highest scores (12-13), and only 3.8% scored 10 or 11.

To determine if the education majors in this study were different than non-education majors from the same institution, data for a comparable group of 191 non-education majors from the same institution were collected contemporaneously. Independent *t-tests* were conducted, and there were no significant group differences on the *IHP*, *ATA*, *Attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian Parenting*, and *Social Desirability*.

Inferential Statistics

Significant correlations[1] were found between the *IHP* and the *GLAS* ($r$=-.66, $p$<.001, $r$=-.80), the *IHP* and *ATA* ($r$=-.59, $p$<.001, $r$=.75), and *ATA* and GLAS ($r$=.71, $p$<.001, $r$=.86). Social Desirability was not correlated with any of the main variables.

For the *CRS*, 15 participants read the case about John and Kim wishing to adopt a male child, 16 participants read about John and Kim wishing to adopt a female child, 15 read about John and Ken wishing to adopt a male child, 17 read about John and Ken wishing to adopt a female child, 15 read about Jane and Kim wishing to adopt a male

[1] The purpose of these correlations was to assess relationships between constructs, and because each of the measures has less than perfect reliability, both pearson product moment correlations and disattenuated correlations (corrected for reliability) are reported respectively in order to present an estimation of the true inter-correlations among these constructs.

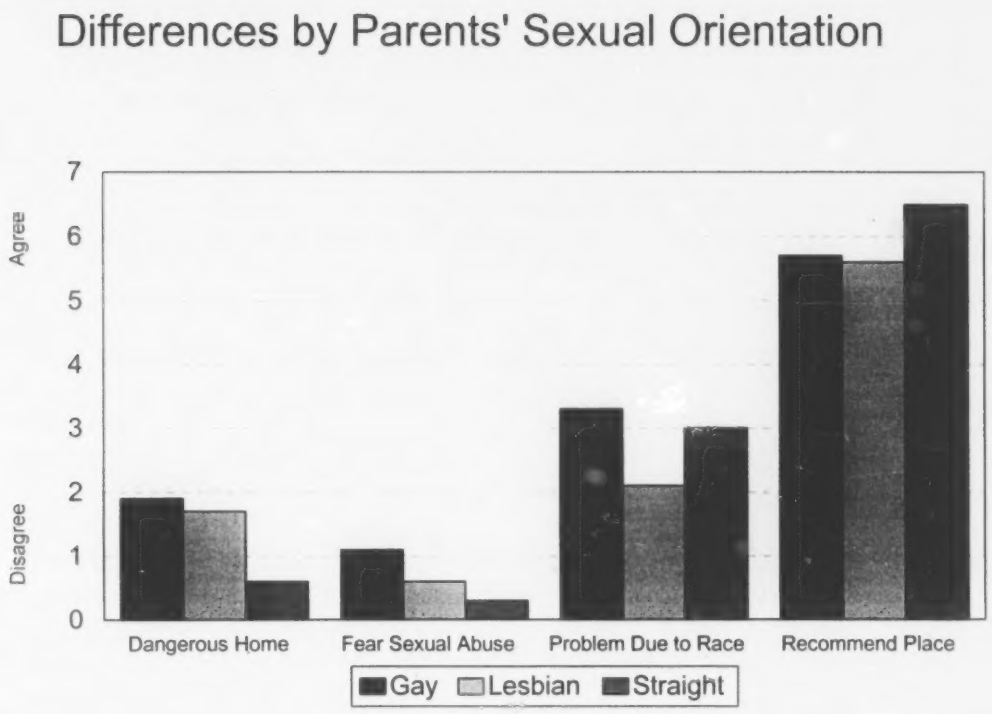
child, and 17 read about Jane and Kim wishing to adopt a female child.

Several 2x3 analysis of variances (*ANOVA*s) were conducted for the items, and revealed some main effects of parents' sexual orientation (see figure 1). For example, there was a significant main effect of sexual orientation when asked how dangerous it would be to raise a child in this home ($F_{(2,90)}$=10.7, $p$<.001); heterosexual parents were rated as creating the least dangerous home environment. Similarly, when asked about degree of concern about child sexual abuse, there was a main effect of parents sexual orientation ($F_{(2, 90)}$=4.6, $p$=.02). There was the most concern when parents were gay, and least concern when parents were heterosexual. Ultimately, education majors were most likely to recommend placement of the child into the home of a heterosexual couple, and least likely to place the child with a lesbian or gay couple ($F_{(2, 90)}$=5.1, $p$=.008). This significant effect remained even when the *IHP* was used as a co-variate.

For the item that asked if the parents would be able to teach appropriate values and raise a morally responsible child, there was a main effect of sex of the child ($F_{(1, 95)}$=6.2, $p$=.014); parents were more likely to teach morals to female children than males).

There were few statistically significant differences for the explanations as to why the child might be having school problems. Of the 9 possible explanations, there was only one significant effect of parent sexual orientation for the item that explained that the child might be having problems because s/he was a different race than classmates ($F_{(2, 90)}$=10.0, $p$=.007), with this most likely being an explanation for children with gay parents, and least likely an explanation when the parents were lesbian. There was also a main effect of child sex for the item that asked if the teacher should meet with the troubled child's parents' ($F_{(1, 90)}$=5.2, $p$=.04). Participants were more inclined to meet with the parents when the child was a female than when the child was a male.

Figure 1




## Discussion

Previous research indicated that most college students and prospective teachers report fairly high degrees of homophobia (Chng & Moore, 1991; Proulx, 1997; Sears, 1991a). The findings of this study reveal an interesting twist on our understanding of attitudes toward lesbian and gay men, particularly with respect to parenting. No education majors in this study scored as "high-grade homophobic," and when asked on a questionnaire to indicate their approval of gay and lesbian couples adopting they indicated relatively high approval. However, when asked to read a scenario about a specific couple adopting, education majors felt heterosexual couples created the safest home environment, and were most likely to recommend the placement of the child into the home of a heterosexual couple. This finding held true even when degree of

"homophobia" was controlled. Among both "homophobic" and "non-homophobic" students heterosexual couples were seen as being the safest, and most appropriate parents.

In some ways this finding makes it difficult to explain the negative linear relationship found between homophobia and responses on the *GLAS*. Because even though "non-homophobic" students were more supportive of gay and lesbian adoption based on a questionnaire, when asked to read scenarios about different families, they were still more likely to award custody to heterosexual parents. So it appears that these students were supportive of gay and lesbian parenting in the abstract, but when asked about a specific case they found it easier to agree with a child being placed in a household headed by a heterosexual couple. It is important to note however, that overall, all three groups were very likely to have gotten custody – but the strength of how strongly students agreed with awarding custody was different for the three groups. Students were supportive of lesbian and gay parents adopting, but they were MORE supportive of heterosexual parents adopting. Thus, the education majors in this study are still being influenced by the powerful messages from society and family.

Previous research also indicated that teachers make assumptions about children based on their knowledge of the children's parents' backgrounds (Casper, et al., 1992). And that teachers believed that students with gay or lesbian parents were more likely to have problems with social interactions (Bliss & Harris, 1999). In this study, education majors did not necessarily attribute a child's behavior and school problems to the sexual orientation of the parents, nor to the parent-child relationship; however, compared to children with lesbian parents, children with gay and heterosexual parents were consider to be at greater risk for problems if they were also a different race than their classmates. Is having a father in the household another "strike" against the child that is already different than her or his classmates? Are lesbian parents perceived as being better able to buffer children from difficulties surrounding race? Obviously, this is an area that requires more exploration.

A limitation of the present study was the homogeneity of our sample. The

majority of participants were heterosexual females of Euro-American descent. Clearly there is poor generalizability of these data. Future research needs to look at a much broader cross-section of education majors.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that our current understanding of homophobia is limited by our assessment tools. It is possible that our old definition of homophobia, (fear of gay men or lesbians), is not necessarily capturing the more subtle forms of sexual bias. Thus, our old definitions of homophobia must change in order to incorporate the more diverse roles that lesbian and gay parents now encompass, and the more diverse ways in which they can be discriminated against.

References

Ballard, R. (1992). Short forms of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale, Psychological Reports, 71, 1155-1160.

Bliss, G. & Harris, M. (1999). Teacher's Views of Students with Gay or Lesbian Parents, Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity, 4(2), 149-171.

Casper, V., Schultz, S. & Wickens, E. (1992). Breaking the Silence: Lesbian and Gay Parents and the Schools, Teachers College Record, 94, 109-137.

Chng, C.L. & Moore, A. (1991). Can attitudes of college students toward AIDS and homosexuality be changed in six-weeks?: The effects of a gay panel, Health Values, 15(2), 41-49.

Cotten-Huston, A.L. & Waite, B.M. (2001). Anti-homosexual attitudes in college students: Predictors and classroom interventions, Journal of Homosexuality, 38(3), 117-133.

Crawford, I., & Solliday, E. (1996). The Attitudes of Undergraduate College Students Toward Gay Parenting, Journal of Homosexuality, 30(4), 63-77.

Crowne, D.P., & Marlowe, D. (1960). A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 24, 349-354.

Donnelly, J., Donnelly, M., Kittleson, M.J., Fogarty, K.J., Procaccino, A.T., & Duncan, D.F. (1997). An exploration of attitudes on sexuality at a northeastern urban university, Psychological Reports, 81, 677-678.

Kozik-Rosabal, G. (2000). "Well, We Haven't Noticed Anything Bad Going On" Said the Principal, Education and Urban Society, 32(3), 368-369.

Patterson, C.J. (1992) Children of lesbian and gay parents, Child Development, 63, 1025-1042.

Proulx, R. (1997). Homophobia in northeastern Brazilian university students, Journal of Homosexuality, 34(1), 47-56.

Sears, J. (1989). Personal feelings and professional attitudes of prospective teachers toward homosexuality and homosexual students: Research findings and curriculum recommendations. ERIC No 312222.

Sears, J. T. (1991a). Educators, Homosexuality, and Homosexual students: Are personal feelings related to professional beliefs? Journal of Homosexuality, 22, 29-79.

Sears, J.T. (1991b). Helping students understand and accept sexual diversity, Educational Leadership, 49(1), 54-56.

Shelley-Sireci, L.M. & Ciano-Boyce, C.B. (2001, April). Development and validation of the Attitudes Toward Adoption Scale and the Gay and Lesbian Parents' Adoption Scale. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Minneapolis, MN. (ERIC No. 033306)

Wills, G. & Crawford, R. (2000). Attitudes toward homosexuality in Shreveport-Bossier City, Louisiana, Journal of Homosexuality, 38(3), 97-116.

Young, R.K., Gallaher, P., Belasco, J., Barr, K., & Webber, A.W. (1991). Changes in fear of AIDS and homophobia in a university population, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 21, 1848-1858.